

IT IS NOT GOOD TO BE ALONE: A LITERARY READING OF GENESIS 2

It is curious to note how often the second chapter of Genesis is referred to as a 'creation story' almost as if it were a variant perspective or some kind of contrast to the creation story presented in Genesis 1. The pity is that the account in Genesis 2 has for so long been subject to a variety of explanations that have overlooked some of the vital literary clues to interpretation that the author has purposely placed in his narrative. What follows is an attempt to:

1. highlight the literary craft used by the Yahwist as the medium for his religious message;
2. identify the clues in the narrative that point to the writer's intention.

The writer of Genesis 2 does not give a recital of the different phases of creation, as the Priestly writer does in Gen 1, but rather assumes that the heavens and the earth are already in place and that the final stages are all that remain. The Yahwist's primary interest, therefore, is not in the details of creation but in the origins of the human characters that are the leading players in creation.

The account opens with the description of a barren earth that had never experienced the life-giving sweetness of rain. The desert is a natural symbol of lifelessness and would have particular poignancy for Middle Eastern readers of this text. Consequently, there was no plant life, nor were there any animals that might feed off the plants. The only water available was what came from the ground via springs and rivers and into this barren environment God places a human being. It is typical of the Yahwist that the story is told in vivid imagery that easily evokes a recognisable scenario in the reader's mind. God is given the features and qualities of a human person with hands to shape dirt into the form of a human being and breath to breathe life into it.

The human character that emerges from God's act of creation is called 'adam', simply because he comes from the 'adamah' which is Hebrew for dirt or earth. In reality the character's name is 'earth-creature,' a name that is clearly generic and not particular or personal. The literal reading of the Hebrew here is:

And the Lord God formed the earth-creature from the dust of the earth

None of our modern English translations make this

semantic connection between earth-creature and the earth but the intended allusion would not have been lost on the Hebrew listeners/readers. The origin of the name is not difficult to track when we consider that the ancients, being aware of the decomposition of bodies after death, would conclude that since they return to the dust of the earth they must have originally come from the dust of the earth. The writer makes a direct association between the earth-creature and the dust of the earth and in doing so evokes the notion of human weakness and fragility. Unlike God this earth-creature is frail and dependent.

God then planted a garden in Eden for the sole purpose of providing an environment for the human creature. Eden stands for fertility and richness and occurs as a distinct contrast to the original dryness of the earth. Eden is a beautiful garden with plenty of water to support trees and lush vegetation. However, the garden is off in the distant east. It is not a geographical location but is meant to be an idealized and imaginary setting for the action that is to follow. The garden has for centuries been described as paradise, which is the word used in the Greek version (*paradeisos*), but this is a loan word from the Persian language and refers to a walled pleasure garden. The garden in Genesis is not a walled pleasure garden but is simply a fertile area with trees. It is clear from the narrative that the vegetation in the garden is part of God's plan to provide food for the humans.

It is interesting to consider the interpretations of the Garden of Eden that have been put forward by outstanding Christian thinkers of the past. Augustine, for example, believed that while Paradise could be viewed allegorically in a spiritual sense it was also a real terrestrial place (Cambell, 1976). Thomas Aquinas argued that the Garden of Eden was an actual geographical location that could still be found. He wrote, 'The situation of Paradise is shut off from the habitable world by mountains, or seas, or some torrid region, which cannot be crossed; and so people who have written about topography make no mention of it.' (Augustine, *City of God* XIII, 21) Thomas specifically contradicted Bede the Venerable who described Paradise as a spiritual idea: 'Bede's assertion is untrue, if taken in its obvious sense.' (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 102, 1, Reply 3). Aquinas' position follows from his exegetical principle that: '...whatever Scripture tells us about Paradise is set down as matter of history; and wherever Scripture makes use of this method, we must hold to the

historical truth of the narrative as a foundation of whatever spiritual explanation we may offer.' (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 102, 1, Reply 1).

The tree of life and the tree of knowledge

There is mention of two significant trees that grow in the garden, namely, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Both trees are clearly symbols and it is not the author's intention that we should interpret the text literally and conclude that these two trees actually exist. Scholars have discussed whether the story speaks of two trees in the middle of the garden, but for the purposes of the leading theme of command and testing only one tree is of real importance. The tree of life is a common symbol in the ancient Middle East and stands for the human desire to escape death and live on forever. Eating the fruit of the tree of life gives eternal life. The tree of knowledge is an obvious symbol of knowledge that may be gained from all manner of human experience. In Hebrew the verb 'know' (*yada*) means to know by experience, and does not mean merely to have a mental knowledge or awareness of something. In effect, the snake in Gen 3 is saying that humans cannot really know good and evil unless they experience both, and this experiential knowledge, he says, will add to their wisdom and stature. In fact, it will make them like God. The issue here is not one of actually eating fruit in an orchard. The narrator is not suggesting that by eating fruit the couple will have a taste of the full range of human experience. Rather, his story shows the snake convincing the woman that humans will not achieve their full potential unless they venture out and 'taste' or experience all that life has to offer, both the good and the bad.

The verses describing the four rivers (Gen 2:10-14) do not have a direct bearing on the narrative and are generally regarded as an insertion. However, they do have a place in the final shape of the narrative and the message is this: the waters that bring life and blessing to the world flow from the river that watered the garden of Eden.

Verses 15-17 contain the conditions for the unfolding of the plot. The creature is placed in the garden, an appropriate environment, and is given the task of caring for that environment. This work is directly related to the land and is good since it involves making a positive contribution to sustaining and supporting the environment.

The creature is allowed to eat nearly all the produce of the environment but is forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, i.e., forbidden to do what it takes to taste the full range of human experience. This divine prohibition is an example of the trial motif that is common to the mythology of many cultures. It is based on the human understanding that one is worthy of a prize or privilege only if one passes the test. The trials of Hercules in Greek mythology and the tests of chivalry and valour of the

Arthurian knights are classic examples of the trial motif. No explanation is given for the test or for its possible outcome. The creature is told that failure to pass the test will only bring death.

Woman is the Climax of Creation

In the next scene (18-25) the plot develops further as God realizes that creation is not complete because the creature is alone in the garden. Being alone is definitely not good. In fact, this part of the narrative follows on more logically from v.8 and contains the idea that the helper for the creature should be one of a corresponding nature. The animals, of course, do not fit this description and in the process of searching for a suitable partner God's experiment appears to be quite naïve. The reader would expect God to know that the animals were never going to work as partners for the human being, but the Yahwist drives his narrative forward toward a climax through the creation of the animals. The animals are paraded before the human, who establishes a relationship with them by naming them. The one who does the naming is the superior party in the relationship and is also the one who decides whether any of the animals is suitable or not. The narrator assumes that the animals do not feel the same aloneness that is felt by the human. Apparently they have their mates and their world is complete.

It is the man, with his particular level of consciousness, who experiences the incompleteness of being alone. It becomes clear that even though the animals do have a place in the life of the human none of them can act as an appropriate partner. The narrator tells us that it is by trial and error that God arrives at the conclusion that only a creature of the same species can perform this function. Forming additional creatures out of the earth is not satisfactory. The ideal companion for the man can only be a creature that can relate to the man on every level, that is, physical, mental and spiritual.

After God's attempt at a solution through the creation of the animals, it turns out that creation is still not complete, the man is still alone and the narrative tension is still present. God now has to take another course of action and has no alternative but to take something of the man himself as the basis for the suitable partner. This explains the somewhat crude process of God taking a rib from the man to fashion the woman. Theologically this process is naïve beyond belief to the modern reader since an omniscient God surely knows how to bring about the right outcome without clumsy experiments. However, it is clear that the writer is using this frustrating procedure to build tension in his narrative that needs resolution. Here lies another literary clue to the intention of the writer. He is carefully crafting a narrative that builds towards a climax and evokes curiosity in the listener/reader as it moves forward.

In Hebrew culture the closest form of relationship was blood relationship, that is, parents and children and

siblings. The Yahwist is striving to show how the woman that God brings to the man is connected to him by blood and therefore qualifies as one who can share an intimate relationship with the man. The fashioning of woman from the rib of 'adam and the name given to her indicate the closeness of the two characters to each other.

The naming of the woman is a piece of poetic assonance that also serves the function of pointing to intimacy. In Hebrew the word for a man is *ish*, and the word for a woman is *ishah*, the latter being the feminine of the former. So the Hebrew is saying: she shall be called *ishah* because she has been taken from *ish*. This particular insight of the writer only works in Hebrew where the pun coincidentally reinforces the notion of close relationship. It is definitely not the writer's intention to suggest that the woman is inferior to the man because she has been taken from the man. Rather, the writer is emphasising the inextricable connection between the two. He underpins this idea when, in v.24, he describes the male and female as being one flesh. Hierarchy is not part of the writer's agenda in his description of the intimacy of this union.

It is only with the creation of woman in 2:21-24 that the narrator shows that God's work of creation is complete. Woman, therefore, arrives not as an afterthought but rather as a climax, which has been building up in the narrative from 2:4b. When the man awakes from sleep he immediately recognises the woman as someone who is of the same flesh and bone as himself, i.e., someone with whom he can form a complete relationship. The man indicates that the final moment of the creative process has arrived when he cries, 'now at last' this is bone of my bone etc. He utters a cry of surprise but also joy with a sense of completeness now that woman has arrived. The reader can almost hear the man congratulating God on finally getting it right.

A Clue to Marriage

The narrator interrupts the story in verse 24 to make a remark to the reader and in so doing provides a clue to the meaning of the story. The statement is cleverly woven into the narrative and, bearing in mind that the story is part of a narrative cycle about the creation of human kind as we know it, we should understand that the narrator's remark expresses a point of view about love and commitment in marriage. Prior to marriage the man's ties are to his own family, parents and siblings. The intimacy, familiarity, comfort and at-homeness he once had with his family he now has to establish with his wife. At the point of marriage he leaves all this for the sake of the woman he marries and commits himself to her and the two become a new identity, i.e. one flesh. The Yahwist makes the point that this new state of intimacy comes as a result of commitment. It does not happen automatically. The man must turn from one way of life and embrace a new arrangement. In fact the Hebrew verb *davaq* means to

cling with devotion and loyalty. The outcome is the closest form of harmony in which man and woman can relate to each other on every level. In this situation they can share the hardships of life along with its joys. The narrator here is not so much describing the creation of man and woman but is showing how commitment in marriage is the ideal and most complete form of relationship between man and woman. This is not a 'once only' historical account. The writer makes it obvious that he is putting an ideal before his listener/reader. Here is a further aspect of the theme of relationship that runs through the Genesis narratives.

By adding that the man and woman were both naked the narrator is preparing the reader for the change that will take place in Gen 3:7. The shame referred to here is the shame that occurs when a person feels exposed or unmasked. For the ancient Hebrews, along with many other peoples of the ancient Middle East, who had a strong sense of personal modesty, shame and nakedness were very closely associated. Ancient artwork usually depicted the conquered enemy naked before the victor in order to portray the shame of defeat. Prisoners of war were often paraded through the city of the victorious army so that the women could jeer at the nakedness of the captives and add to their shame. In Gen 2 the couple do not experience shame at being naked and this only serves to highlight their innocence. They have nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. The writer makes it clear that the human body with its sexuality is certainly nothing to cause shame.

When we come to examine the purpose and place of this story in Genesis we are often distracted by traditions of interpretation that have grown up over the Christian centuries. For instance, 'Adam' is generally understood to be the proper name of the first human being and yet we have seen above that it is a generic name and really stands for humanity. With this in mind we can see how the story performs the function of myth, certainly not myth as commonly understood to be a story of complete fiction or a fairy tale, but myth in the anthropological sense. From the point of view of anthropology or the philosophy of religion - *a myth is a story that contains highly imaginative and symbolic language to give expression to the truths and values that are held sacred in any given culture*. Myths always respond to mystery. They do not attempt to explain mysteries in life but they enable people to cope with, and make some sense of the inexplicable. It is also the function of myth to represent universal characters and events in stories that typify reality and human interaction with the world.

In the story of Genesis 2 Adam and Eve are universal figures representing everyman and everywoman. The name 'Eve', like that of Adam, is generic because the writer tells us it means 'mother of all the living' (3:20). In fact, the etymology of the name Eve is uncertain and all we can say is that it is associated with the Hebrew

verb *hayya* (=to exist). In their generic roles Adam and Eve represent all humanity in all ages. Their weakness is ours and their tendency to prefer selfish ends is typical of all humans. Their behaviour is a mirror image of our behaviour and they portray what happens to human beings when we prefer our own gain to doing the will of God.

Initially, Adam and Eve enjoy a state of innocence and their relationship with God is harmonious. The Yahwist shows them to be superior to the rest of the animal world and capable of relating to God in a way that none of the other creatures can. In Genesis 2 the man and the woman stand for unspoiled humanity and because their relationship with God and each other is undamaged they live in a blissful and carefree environment.

An authentic approach to this story in Genesis 2 is to take the account on its own terms and not read later interpretations into it. In Gen 1 creation was the focus of attention and human beings were the climactic item in a sequence of God's cosmic creative activity. In Gen 2 the earth is the backdrop for a story in which the humans are the centre of interest. It is clear, then, that Gen 2 is not essentially a creation story but deals with the origin of human beings and ends with a statement that the ideal relationship between man and woman is that of commitment to each other in marriage. It is this relationship that forms the foundation of all human communities.

Adam and Eve—players in a story that is packed with truth

Readers of this story today, in the climate of a huge wave of popular interest in fantasy, can be guided by the views of modern commentators and practitioners of mythology. Joseph Campbell, for instance, holds that one of the functions of myth is to validate and maintain an established order (Campbell, 1976). The writer of Gen 2 is illustrating this social function by drawing attention to the marriage relationship of man and woman as a structure in the human family that was designed and intended by God and consequently invested with sacredness and inviolability.

J.R.R. Tolkien insists that myths deal with truth because they convey truths about things that are beyond the power of human definition. While the whole fabric of a myth might be highly imaginative it must be remembered that its purpose is to communicate truths. The myth, Tolkien argued, is the best way—sometimes the only way—of providing insights into the inexpressible, the transcendent. While admitting that, like all things human, myths are imperfect, Tolkien was convinced that they contain truth that points reliably to the eternal reality that is God.

To ask the question of the account in Genesis 2: is this a true story? is really to ask the wrong question, because we would be posing our query from a

rationalist, post-Enlightenment view of reality. Our minds can get so caught up in the search for factual accuracy that we can miss the point of the message that is being revealed in the biblical text. G.K. Chesterton's maxim is valuable here: 'not facts first, truth first'. Both he and Tolkien were mindful of the difference between facts and truth, namely, facts belong to the physical world while truth is part of metaphysical reality (Pearce, 2001). One only has to consider the works of Christian writers like J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers to appreciate how works of the imagination can contain Christian truths.

A corollary of this is that the narrative details of Gen 2 are of less importance for our salvation and spiritual guidance than the truth about the relationship between man and woman in God's creation. For instance, it is not crucial to our salvation and spiritual growth to affirm the idea that God had breath in order to breathe life into 'adam or that woman was made from man as a result of the first act of clinical surgery. The fathers of Vatican II encourage us to discern the intention of the biblical writer so that we may grasp those truths in the text 'which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation' (*Dei verbum* 11). Picking up the hermeneutical clues from the Yahwist we would have to say that among the truths that pertain to salvation in this narrative of Genesis 2 the key ones are:

God is creator and source of life for all living things;

God created human beings in order to enter into relationship with them;
human beings have been created with a higher sense of consciousness than the animals;
male and female humans are of the same species and have been created to function as complementary partners;
united in marriage, males and females become one, capable of sharing their lives equally on all levels;
the marriage partnership represents a new identity distinct from the original families of the couple;
it is not God's intention that males or females exist alone but rather live in society;
the order that derives from this marriage/family structure is of divine invention and therefore to be highly valued and maintained.

Conclusion

A central idea in the interpretation of any piece of Scripture is that we should, as far as possible, seek to discern the intention of the writer. This would not only involve taking the sound advice of *Dei Verbum* but would represent an honest approach to the inspired text. A true interpretation of Genesis 2 should take into

account the intervention of the author who steps aside from his story to give us a vital clue to his intention. This clue, in 2:24, is often overlooked as an authorial reflection on the meaning of the preceding story. It

takes the form of a summation that lays bare the author's intention to highlight the oneness that should characterise marriage, the ideal relationship between man and woman in human society.

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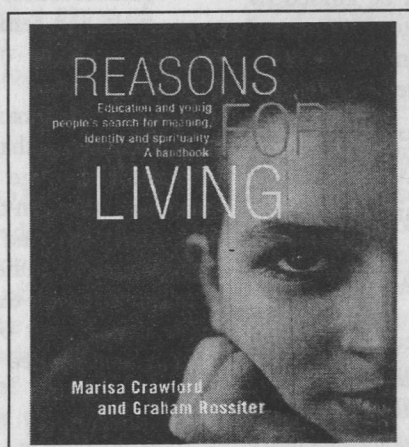
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Laurie Woods is a Senior Lecturer in the National School of Theology at Australian Catholic University, Strathfield Campus

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